

"Aq Notes"

A SUMMARY OF NEWS, EVENTS AND FACTS FROM USDA



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The Fall Foliage Color Hotline

USDA's Forest Service fall color hotline is available for national forest visitors to receive weekly updates of fall foliage changes across the nation.

\$57 Million Child Nutrition and Food Assistance Purchase

Secretary Veneman announced plans to purchase up to \$56.8 million of dried fruits and tree nuts for donation to child nutrition and other domestic food assistance programs. This includes dried cranberries, dried dates, dried figs, dried plums, raisins, almonds and walnuts.

"This purchase will provide recipients of our federal food programs with good, nutritious and quality products," said Veneman.

USDA regularly purchases a variety of high-quality food products every year for distribution by to the National School Lunch Program, the School Breakfast Program, the Summer Food Service Program, the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations, the Nutrition Program for the Elderly, the Commodity Supplemental Food Program and the Emergency Food Assistance Program. USDA also makes emergency purchases of commodities for distribution to victims of natural disasters.

USDA STRENGTHENS FOOD SAFETY POLICIES

In a continuing effort to strengthen food safety programs and protect public health, the USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) this week announced a series of new measures designed to reduce the incidence of *E. coli* O157:H7 contamination of raw ground beef. The actions are a result of FSIS's ongoing in-depth review of the current program and are based on scientific data that demonstrate the pathogen is more prevalent than previously estimated.

"Strengthening food safety programs that protect consumers from food borne hazards continues to be a top priority at USDA," said Secretary Veneman. "These actions will further help ensure that meat and poultry plants address ways to reduce the presence of *E. coli* O157:H7."

"The scientific data show that *E. coli* O157:H7 is more prevalent than previously estimated," said Under Secretary for Food Safety Dr. Elsa Murano. "These action steps move beyond detection of this hazard and on to preventing it."

In December 2001, FSIS announced that it would conduct a comprehensive review of current food safety regulations, including provisions of the 1996 Pathogen Reduction/Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points (PR/HACCP) rule, to help improve the efficiency and accountability of FSIS programs and personnel. The following actions will be published in the Federal Register as a notice. USDA will: (see page 2)

VENEMAN BOOSTS BIOBASED PRODUCT PURCHASES

Secretary Veneman this week announced a cooperative agreement between USDA and Iowa State University that will pave the way to increase federal purchases of biobased products as required by the Energy Title of the new farm law.

"The new Farm Bill provides USDA with additional tools to further the goals of the President's national energy policy," Veneman said. "We expect this new program to help stimulate broad interest in commercial and industrial products made from agricultural and forest materials. This initiative will help expand markets for farmers and foresters through the use of value-added bioenergy agricultural products."

Under the agreement USDA will provide \$1 million each year for testing biobased products. In the near future, USDA will issue proposed guidelines for use by federal agencies in meeting the biobased product procurement requirements as outlined in the Farm Bill. An electronic list of qualified biobased products will be provided to federal agencies. A voluntary USDA Certified Biobased Product labeling program will emphasize the beneficial environmental and performance characteristics of biobased products that qualify for the label.

Iowa State University was chosen to lead the effort because of the significant resources it has directed toward developing biobased products.

Other News...

This week, Secretary Veneman announced the appointments of 11 new members to the USDA's National Agricultural Research, Extension, Education and Economics Advisory Board (NAREE).

The purpose of NAREE is to advise the Secretary, land grant colleges and universities, and the House and Senate Agriculture committees/subcommittees on USDA research, education and extension policies and priorities.

Former First Lady Lady Bird Johnson and her Committee for a More Beautiful Capital have been selected as the first recipients of the U.S. National Arboretum's Gold Medal Award. Mrs. Johnson and the committee were recognized for their sustained contributions in beautifying Washington, DC, and other areas of the country with trees, flowers and other ornamental plantings.

The recognition is part of a series of ongoing events this year to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the arboretum, in Washington, DC. The arboretum is operated by the Agricultural Research Service, the chief scientific research agency of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

U.S. and Mexican scientists have signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to formalize their partnership in solving agricultural problems through research and education.

The agreements will further strengthen scientific and research cooperation and partnerships between the U.S. and Mexico.

Food Safety changes continued--

- Require beef slaughter and grinding plants to acknowledge that *E. coli* O157:H7 is a hazard reasonably likely to occur in their operations, unless they can prove otherwise;
 - Require, based on the above assumption, plants to perform a comprehensive re-examination of their food safety systems and include a step to eliminate or reduce the risk of *E. coli* O157:H7 in their product. In the case of grinding operations, this could consist of a requirement for their suppliers to certify the utilization of a decontamination method in their operation;
 - Verify through increased USDA inspection that intervention steps implemented by establishments are validated, in that they are effective under actual in-plant conditions;
 - Eliminate current exemptions from FSIS microbiological testing. This will result in random testing of all beef grinding operations by FSIS personnel and;
 - Issue guidance to grinding facilities regarding additional prevention actions including: 1) increased plant testing for *E. coli* O157:H7; and 2) avoiding mixing product from different suppliers to reduce the chance of cross contamination and facilitate trace back investigations.
- For more information go to www.fsis.usda.gov.

USDA, Navajo nation convene first-ever site visit

USDA held the first ever Department-wide site visit and consultation with the Navajo Nation in Window Rock, Arizona on Sept. 23. Customer service to the Navajo Nation, Farm Bill implementation, homeland security, new technology, rural development, education and training and marketing issues topped the agenda.

"USDA is committed to ensuring that our programs are available to everyone who needs them," Agriculture Secretary Ann M. Veneman said. "This consultation and site visit is an opportunity to present these available programs so that the Navajo Nation can fully benefit from them."

Assistant Secretary for Administration Lou Gallegos headed the USDA delegation that included senior officials from each USDA mission area.

In addition to discussing issues that confront the Navajo Nation and sharing USDA program information, Gallegos announced nearly \$450,000 in rural development grants and continued a major recruitment effort begun a year ago by Forest Service employee, Julia Yazzie, a Navajo tribe member.

Cattle Feeding Program off to a successful start

Since sign-up began on Aug. 28, more than 14,000 producers have signed up to receive feed credits worth more than \$48 million for more than 2 million cattle in foundation herds. Feed credits are redeemed at participating mills or dealers that USDA supplies with nonfat dry milk to be used in manufacturing feed. Sign-up continues through Dec. 2, 2002.

"This is an innovative program that is providing immediate relief to livestock producers," Secretary Veneman said. "This program, along with other drought relief measures that the Bush Administration has provided is helping producers during these difficult times."

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